

Rep. Rick Larsen
2021 Child Care Roundtable
Report

February 8, 2021



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Introduction

This report summarizes findings and recommendations that emerged from five virtual roundtable discussions Rep. Rick Larsen conducted in January 2021 on the topic of child care in Washington’s Second District.

In a July 2020 report, Washington’s Child Care Collaborative Task Force (C3TF) estimated more than half a million children in Washington state did not have access to licensed child care prior to the pandemic. Since then, the pandemic has only exacerbated the child care shortage in Washington. To better understand the local impacts of the child care emergency and devise legislative solutions, Rep. Larsen met with organizations, providers and local government officials from the five counties he represents.

The roundtable discussions made clear that a lack of funding to support child care services is the fundamental cause of the shortage. However, staff shortages, decreased enrollment and additional costs brought on by the pandemic have worsened the problem. Mental health challenges, hunger and the digital divide also constitute sizable hardship for working families who rely on or work in child care services. Moreover, lack of access to affordable child care disproportionately harms Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities.

Background

Safe, affordable child care is essential to Washington families and is a necessary element of a thriving economy. Availability of high-quality and affordable child care enables parents to participate effectively in the workforce and know their children are in a safe environment with access to opportunities for learning and development.

Washington state has a serious shortage of child care. In July 2020, C3TF estimated 20% of the state's child care providers had temporarily closed. Since the pandemic began, child care capacity in each county in the Second District has decreased significantly—by nearly 50% in Whatcom and San Juan counties and more than 20% in Island, Skagit and Snohomish counties. In Snohomish County alone, 70 providers have closed since the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, required health and safety measures have created a steep decline in child care capacity.

Nationally, the reduction in child care capacity has had a significant impact on the economy. Between February and December 2020, 2.1 million women left the U.S. workforce; for many this was due in part to a lack of available child care.¹² Without action, the damage to child care providers could be permanent, harming families and the economy.

The roundtable discussions revealed many common problems, including funding, declining enrollment and difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. In addition, participants highlighted specific issues that are unique to their communities. For example, in Skagit, Whatcom and Snohomish counties, many providers struggle to make ends meet due to a lack of affordable housing, which is spurred by regional growth and other factors. Families in Island County rely on a piecemeal network of independent providers for their child care needs, and that network is not big enough to handle both local residents' needs and the needs of sailors at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island who are unable to access on-base child care services due to limited availability. The high cost of living and geographic isolation of San Juan County make it difficult for child care professionals in low paying jobs to live where they work.

¹ <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/December-Jobs-Day.pdf>

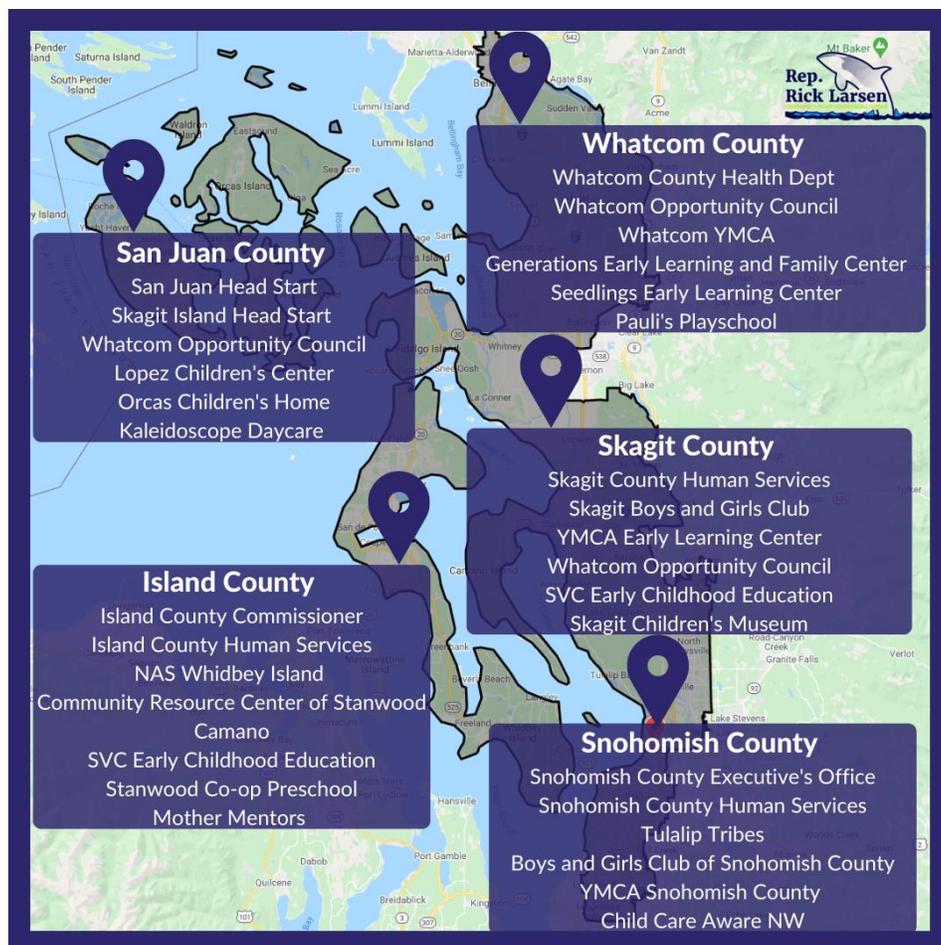
² https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/EarlyEd_Minis_Report6_121420_Final.pdf

2021 Child Care Roundtables

Meeting Overview

During his January 2021 roundtables, Representative Larsen met with 33 groups and providers.

Type of Stakeholder	Participants
Independent providers	10
Government entities or representatives	7
Large providers	6
Advocacy organizations	5
Head Start providers	4
Tribes	1



Common Themes

Lack of Resources

Many attendees agreed that more financial support for child care is badly needed. Snohomish County Human Services advocated for more flexibility in future COVID-19 relief packages, as each child care facility's needs are different. Attendees cited establishment of safety protocols and providing affordable health insurance as possible uses of these funds. Some providers, like Whatcom YMCA and Seedlings Early Learning Center, are struggling with shouldering the burden of COVID-19 related costs such as cleaning supplies, PPE and sick leave for staff. Skagit/Islands Head Start has used Head Start funding to purchase supplies. However, Whatcom Opportunity Council said some providers have had to choose between staying open without taking a salary and going bankrupt. Child Care Aware NW WA and Island County characterized "mom and pop" providers as the lifeblood of the industry, but they are struggling to stay in business.

Most providers who attended the roundtables received some combination of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans or Coronavirus Relief Fund money from local jurisdictions. These included YMCAs and Boys & Girls Clubs, early learning centers, and independent providers. Many providers spoke of this funding as a "lifeline" that enabled them to continue providing child care services to families. Individual providers in Skagit and Whatcom praised their respective county governments for establishing grant opportunities dedicated specifically to child care.

Workforce Development: Recruitment, Training and Retention

Staffing child care facilities and keeping them open were already major challenges in the industry but the pandemic exacerbated them. Now more than ever, child care serves not only as a place for children to go during parents' work hours, but also as an environment for quality childhood development. A trained and qualified child care workforce is better able to provide this kind of care.

Some of the challenges child care providers face are related to an inadequate supply of trained child care workers. Mother Mentors in Island County said they need more training and benefits. Stanwood Camano Cooperative Preschool echoed this, explaining they need more funding to provide career development training and certification for staff. Skagit Preschool and Resource Center underscored these challenges, especially in caring for children with special needs, including children with neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Prospective child care workers also need better incentives to enter and stay in the field. Jobs in the child care industry often do not pay enough for workers to live where they work, and rarely include benefits. Attendees from San Juan and Snohomish counties cited a high cost of living and climbing housing prices as barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified staff. One child care worker in San Juan County remarked, “Being told you’re an ‘essential worker’ and barely surviving is almost too much to take.”

The pandemic has made recruitment and retention issues worse. Many older child care workers exited the industry due to health concerns. Multiple roundtable attendees noted the challenge posed by staff contracting COVID-19 and taking needed time off to quarantine while they recover. As noted by Whatcom YMCA, some staff have left their jobs to take care of their own children who are remote learning, and enough substitutes for facilities to run at full capacity are often not available. Skagit YMCA Early Learning Center would like to expand programming, but they lack the staff to do so.

Developing a better child care workforce is part of recovery conversations at the Snohomish County Executive’s office, Snohomish County Human Services and elsewhere. Island County Commissioner Janet St. Clair pointed to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and the need for workforce development programs to enable women to reenter the workforce. Without adequate child care, a parent who has lost a job during the pandemic may not have the availability to look for a new one. Snohomish County Senior Policy Analyst Ty Trenary tied the robustness of the child care workforce to the health of the economy: child care is necessary for parents to stay in their jobs and help build back the economy following the pandemic.

Decreased Enrollment

Child care providers use fees paid by families to operate facilities. During the pandemic, some families have chosen to keep children at home for health and safety reasons. Some parents have lost a job and therefore no longer need child care or cannot afford it. Decreased enrollment makes it difficult to pay fixed costs like rent. Small providers suffer even more acutely from fewer families seeking child care services.

Decreased enrollment may leave large providers short on cash for expenses like PPE, as with Whatcom YMCA, whose enrollment is down 15%. Generations Learning Center is operating at only 70% capacity due to COVID-19, and Friday

Harbor Children's House Montessori is operating at only 40% to handle COVID-19 safety measures.

Hunger

Hunger is also a growing concern. At Seedlings Early Learning Center, some families send their children to daycare for meals because they do not have enough food at home.

Several large providers in the Second District have worked with local partners to offer meals and snacks to children. The numbers are significant:

- Boys & Girls Clubs of Snohomish County: 2.5M meals and 1.5M snacks between March and December 2020
- YMCA Snohomish County: 480,000 meals and snacks since the beginning of the pandemic
- Skagit Boys & Girls Clubs: 4,500 summer meals and 2,800 meals during the school year so far
- Whatcom Boys & Girls Clubs: 55,000 grab and go meals since the beginning of the pandemic

With meals and other services in mind, a representative of the Whatcom Health Department said child care facilities are becoming safety net facilities that need additional funding to adequately provide these services.

Mental Health: Children & Child Care Workers

Mental health services for staff and children were a serious concern. Child care staff are working longer hours during the pandemic. Most child care providers did not sign up for the current working conditions and fear getting sick themselves or bringing the virus home to their families. A representative from the Tulalip Tribes noted periodic closures due to positive virus cases cause unpredictability, which only adds to child care workers' stress. Representatives from Island County pointed out many workers in child care do not have health benefits to access mental health care resources. A child care worker from Whatcom County described feeling isolated: "We've always kind of felt undervalued in the community, even as we're in the trenches every day working with these children."

During the pandemic, as children participate in remote learning, child care workers double as teachers. However, in addition to adding a layer of responsibilities and extra duties, many child care workers simply are not qualified as educators.

Several attendees noted the uptick in mental health needs for children during the pandemic. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Snohomish County said the organization needs ten times the mental health staff they have now. Representatives from the Tulalip Tribes and Snohomish County, among others, talked about the need to support children’s social-emotional health when the pandemic is over due to a lack of typical peer-to-peer social interactions.

The Digital Divide

The lack of access to reliable internet, or the “digital divide,” has become glaringly evident for child care providers during the pandemic. Whatcom Boys & Girls Club noted the cost of internet has gone up to \$2,000 per month to provide internet access for kids who are learning remotely, and the internet service is unreliable. Providers with locations in rural areas like Skagit Boys & Girls Clubs and providers serving the Tulalip Tribes also have concerns about stable and affordable internet access.

Without reliable internet, students cannot attend virtual classes or complete assignments on time. Whatcom County Boys and Girls Club noted students at the club miss an average of 27 assignments and the rolling internet brown-outs have made it difficult for students to catch up in class.

Unreliable internet also harms providers. Child Care Aware of NW WA pointed out that for providers with little or no internet access, it is difficult to apply for grants because applications are almost entirely online.

Legislative Recommendations

Roundtable participants’ comments led to the development of recommendations for future legislation and improvements to existing federal programs:

Challenge	Recommendation
Racial Disparity & Access	<p>Focus future child care legislation on racial and social equity to alleviate disparities.</p> <p>Provide additional funding for community-based organizations and afterschool centers currently operating as “unlicensed” child care providers, like some Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCA locations.</p>
Workforce Training, Special Education & Mental Health	<p>Require the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) Office of Child Care and the Department of Education to establish an online clearinghouse of early childhood education curricula, lesson plans and best practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prioritize social emotional learning resources – Include special education resources and trainings to assist families and child care workers – Require a national advertising campaign to make families and child care professionals aware of available resources
Low Wages & Workforce Retention	<p>Establish a “Child Care Worker Retention Fund” to provide child care workers an annual bonus to boost income to a more livable wage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Funds are intended to supplement child care workers’ salary

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – State amount can mirror the Child Care Development Block Grant formula – Broad scope: licensed child care facilities, licensed after school programs temporarily operating child care services and other community-based organizations operating child care services – Five states established similar programs with help from CARES Act funding, but not WA. However, WA has used retention grants and other wage initiatives or investments to retain its child care workforce.
Workforce Development	Establish state-level competitive grant funding to support experienced child care workers in pursuit of specialized degree programs related to child care (e.g. speech language pathology, occupational therapy)
Digital Divide	Ensure federal appropriations for broadband funding include a child care set-aside in addition to school funding

Conclusion

Access to affordable child care is essential to working families. Child care workers tirelessly provide services for children and families and have increased their efforts during the pandemic. Rep. Larsen has supported solutions at the federal level to expand access to child care, but recent roundtables revealed the need for government to do more. Despite geographic and socioeconomic differences, child care stakeholders from across Northwest Washington were unified in calling for additional funding, improving recruitment and retention, solving problems related to declining enrollment, tackling hunger and closing the digital divide. Congress must provide additional funding, establish programs to address the pandemic, streamline processes and help build coalitions that will provide additional support to providers. Tackling these issues will be a priority for Representative Larsen in the 117th Congress.

Appendix: Rep. Larsen's Actions on Child Care

Rep. Larsen voted for or supports the following federal solutions:

- Cosponsored the *Child Care Workforce and Facilities Act of 2019*, which would help address workforce shortages by providing grants to states that establish programs to train and retain high-quality child care workers. Also, the bill would provide funding to build and renovate child care facilities in child care deserts.
- Cosponsored the *Child Care for Working Families Act*, which would broaden eligibility for child care programs, invest in workforce development and structure a cost sharing agreement between the federal government and states.
- Other House-Passed Child Care Measures:
 - *Child Care is Essential Act*: Would create a \$50B child care stabilization fund within the Child Care and Development Block Grant program.
 - *Child Care for Economic Recovery Act*: Would boost the child and dependent care tax credits and make an annual \$10B investment for FY20-24 to invest in state-level child care infrastructure.
- *Moving Forward Act*: \$10B over the next five years to invest in state-level child care infrastructure.
- *Veterans' Access to Child Care Act*: Directs VA to provide child care assistance to eligible veterans actively receiving treatment or other health care services.
- Introduced with Senator Murray the *Women Veterans and Families Health Services Act* which will help veterans receiving health care and mental health services from VA access child care assistance. This provision became law as an element of a broader veterans bill in early 2021.
- Enacted COVID-19 Legislation:
 - *Families First Coronavirus Response Act* (signed into law March 18, 2020): Paid Sick and Family Leave provisions.

- *CARES Act* (signed into law March 27, 2020): \$3.5B in Child Care and Development Block Grant Program, \$750M for Head Start, Paycheck Protection Program
- *Consolidated Appropriations Act* (signed into law December 27, 2020):
 - COVID-19 specific provisions: \$10B for Child Care and Development Block Grants, \$250M for Head Start, Clarified Pandemic-EBT program applies to children 0-6
 - Appropriations: \$5.9B for Child Care and Development Block Grants, \$10.7B for Head Start
- President Biden's American Rescue Plan:
 - \$25B to establish an emergency stabilization fund for child care providers.
 - Additional \$15B, to complement December's \$10B, in Child Care and Development Block Grants.
 - Expand child care tax credit so families making less than \$125,000 annually can receive up to \$4,000 for one child under age 13 or \$8,000 for two or more. Families making \$125,000- \$400,000 are eligible for a partial credit.